

Mutua vulnera: dying together in the Flavian epic family

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Family violence is a major theme of Flavian epic. Family members murder one another, or join one another in suicide, in each of the three major poems. These episodes of family violence have been read in generic terms, as negative images of the family that self-consciously contrast with the typically positive image in Homeric and Virgilian epic (Bernstein 2008). They have also been read in historicizing terms, as responses to imperial power (Zissos 2009) and to the civil war that brought the Flavian dynasty to power (McGuire 1997). This workshop presentation, based on a commentary in preparation on Silius *Punica* 2, focuses on the mass suicide of the besieged Saguntines (*Pun.* 2.457-707; Küppers 1986).

Silius’ divine framing of this episode is a complex, self-conscious, and sophisticated response to the epic tradition (as against, e.g., Feeney 1991). *Fides* endeavors to spur the Saguntines to armed resistance and is quickly superseded by Tisiphone’s maddening of these victims. *Fides*’ effort comes in response to a petition by Hercules, a powerless supporter of the Saguntines (Asso 2010, Tipping 2010). Allusion to the Virgilian Hercules’ petition of Jupiter establishes the expectation of failure. The contest between the Fury and a personified virtue sets the episode in dialogue with the brothers’ duel in Statius *Thebaid* 11. Making the Fury responsible for the mass murder/suicide establishes deliberate contrasts with the vengeful Venus who provokes the Lemnian massacre in Valerius’ *Argonautica* (Elm von der Osten 2007) and Statius’ *Thebaid*, as well as with the suicide of Lucan’s Opitergians, undertaken without divine intervention (Eldred 2002).

A maddened woman’s sparking of the mass murder/suicide evokes both the women’s burning of the ships in *Aeneid* 5 (Nugent 1992) as well as the Lemnian massacre. The narrative of the murder/suicide itself deliberately reverses the conventions of decorous aristocratic suicide (Hill 2004), as featured in the Capua episode (*Pun.* 13.277-298). Famine has destroyed the Saguntines’ bodies, killers hesitate to strike and do not recognize their victims, and emphasis on the perpetrators’ madness precludes belief in their exemplary pursuit of virtue. The Capuan episode offers a further point of contrast: Pan’s intervention to calm the vengeful Romans inverts Tisiphone’s intervention to madden the Saguntines (*Pun.* 13.314-325). The coda to the episode in the narrator’s voice attempts to transform the Saguntines’ gruesome end into an act of *fides*, in keeping with the exemplary tradition (e.g., Val. Max. 6.6.5 *ext.* 1, Pliny *NH* 3.20), but the prior narrative has rendered such claims unpersuasive. Subsequent references to the Saguntines’ fate throughout the epic call into question the Romans’ adherence to the virtue of *fides* (Dominik 2003, Dominik 2006).

I set my reading in dialogue with recent work by Raymond Marks, who has argued that Silius’ choice of an historical subject in general is a deliberate rejection of the mythological focus of his contemporaries’ work (Marks 2010), and that the Saguntum episode in particular responds to the civil war narrative of Statius’ *Thebaid* (Marks 2013). The multiple clashes between the episode’s narrative, intertextual, and ideological levels call the exemplarity of the Saguntines into question. I argue that Silius engages with the epic tradition of family violence, for the purposes of differentiating (in ascending order of generality): (a) his version of the Saguntine suicide both

from its own exemplary tradition and from family murder/suicide in other epics; (b) his representation of suicide and civil war from other epics; and (c) his mythicized history from the mythological epics of his contemporaries.

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